

**AHEAD | Highland Games**

# Testing the Power of Plaid

By EMILY S. RUEB

**O**N a late September weekend in Bethlehem, Pa., burly men will take turns using a pitchfork to hurl a burlap bag stuffed with nylon rope over a bar. They will toss a telephone-pole-thick, 20-foot wooden shaft end over end from a running start. They'll fling a 22-pound cannonball attached to a stick resembling a broom handle. And they'll do it all in kilts.

The Celtic Classic Highland games and festival draws about 250,000 revelers for bagpipe and fiddle competitions, dance and music performances and traditional Highland sports, which had their origin in raw-strength events used long ago by Scottish chiefs to single out the most able protectors of their territory.

The event with the pitchfork is the sheaf toss (in some games the bag is stuffed with straw rather than rope), the pole is a caber, and the cannonball-on-a-stick contest is the hammer throw.

The most famous Highland games, the Braemar Gathering in Scotland, is said to date back to King Malcolm III of Scotland, whose reign began in 1058. In modern form, some Highland events — notably the hammer toss and the shot-put, based on stone throwing — have found their way into the Olympics.

Highland games take place around the United States and Canada all year, with several scheduled this fall. Each operates autonomously, and the equipment and scoring can vary. But most require competitors to complete a decathlon-like circuit. In Bethlehem, the main event is the United States championship, an invitational competition featuring the 10 top Highland athletes, with prizes from \$500 to \$3,500.

Paul Ferency, 51, a professional

competitor from Easton, Pa., who helped start the Celtic Classic, said there are up to 250 professionals (called "heavies") worldwide. The games celebrate Scottish heritage but welcome everyone — some include women.

Mr. Ferency, whose forebears were Hungarian, has no trouble getting into the spirit. "Every time I hear the bagpipes, I get goose bumps," he said.

In Estes Park, Colo., 75,000 spectators are expected at the Longs Peak Scottish/Irish Highland Festival, which ends on Sunday. "This is no backyard picnic," said Jim Durward, the founder. "You'll see more kilts and hear more bagpipes than you will on a trip to Scotland."

On the program are Highland games, more than 1,000 Scottish and Irish dancers, bagpipe competitions, concerts and a joust. The roar of the crowd will be punctuated by hourly cannon exhibitions — with two of the guns firing bowling balls into Lake Estes, the home of Essie, American cousin of the Loch Ness monster.

In October, the Seaside Highland Games in Ventura, Calif., and the Stone Mountain Highland Games near Atlanta will also combine traditional athletic events and lighthearted extras. In Ventura, the celebration includes Scottish ballads, Celtic rock, a whiskey tasting and a wedding; Stone Mountain has a Scottish Sword Dance contest.

And this month, representatives of some 60 clans will gather at the Loon Mountain ski resort in Lincoln, N.H., for harp playing, sheepdog herding and variations on the usual sports, a hybrid of Strongman and Scottish heavy events known as Highlander athletics. These feats include hoisting logs overhead and lifting 300-

pound spheres of concrete onto a chest-high platform.

"It's a niche sport, sort of like rodeo," said Dave Barron, 35, a Manhattan lawyer who has competed in Highland games for 18 years and was second over all in New Hampshire in 2004. He used his winnings to pay for his honeymoon in Scotland last year.

Though Mr. Barron's background is partly Scottish, that's not why he became interested in the games. He says it's because he enjoys the conviviality, and he counts many of his fellow competitors as friends. But he doesn't always level with others about his day job.

"Normally," he confessed, "I tell people I'm a lumberjack."

## DETAILS

### ESTES PARK, COLO.

What: Longs Peaks Scottish/Irish Highland Festival, [www.scotfest.com](http://www.scotfest.com); admission from \$20.

When: Sept. 6 to 9.

### LINCOLN, N.H.

What: New Hampshire Highland Games, (800) 358-7268; [www.nhscot.org](http://www.nhscot.org); \$15 to \$45.

When: Sept. 21 to 23.

### BETHLEHEM, PA.

What: Celtic Classic, (610) 868-9599; [www.celticfest.org](http://www.celticfest.org); free to \$30.

When: Sept. 28 to 30.

### VENTURA, CALIF.

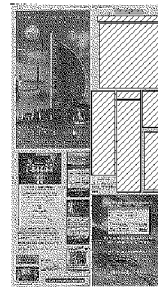
What: Seaside Highland Games, (818) 886-4968; [www.seaside-games.com](http://www.seaside-games.com); \$3 to \$20.

When: Oct. 12 to 14.

### STONE MOUNTAIN, GA.

What: Stone Mountain Highland Games, (770) 521-0228; [www.smhg.org](http://www.smhg.org); \$4 to \$15.

When: Oct. 19 to 21.





**FEATS OF  
STRENGTH**

Ryan Vierra  
competed in  
the sheaf toss  
at the Celtic  
Classic in  
Bethlehem,  
Pa., last year.

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